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AUTHOR	Mills, Rebecca
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ABSTRACT

Schools use a variety of ways to group students for instruction; most prevalent in middle level schools seems to be ability grouping. Arguments once considered persuasive for ability grouping are losing influence given evidence that the practice results in few achievement benefits and several negative effects. This Digest discusses attitudes toward tracking, summarizes research on ability grouping and tracking, and provides suggestions for further research. Proponents of tracking argue that tracking helps schools meet the varying needs of students, provides low-achieving students with increased attention and a slower work pace, and allows high-achieving students to be challenged by faster-paced, more-demanding lessons. Those opposed to tracking are concerned about the perceived psychological damage to low achievers, the slower pace and lower quality of instruction, the more inexperienced or sometimes less-capable teachers assigned to teach lower-ability students, the low expectations for student performance held by teachers, and the absence of strong peer role models in classes for low-ability students. A survey of principals indicated that ability grouping is present in many middle schools, although some schools are considering implementing other strategies. Research indicated that teachers who wish to retain ability grouping are more subject centered, and those who wish to eliminate it are more student centered. Other research indicated that ability grouping makes the school schedule less flexible, and that after the elimination of tracking, teachers reported positive social benefits, positive behavioral implications, positive academic benefits, and less parental competition. Studies of mathematics tracking found no positive long-term effects for low-ability students who were placed in low-grouped classes, positive effects for average-achieving students placed in high-track classes, and no negative effects for high-achieving students in computation or problem-solving achievement and positive effects in concept development.

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Researchers suggest the need for further research to determine long-term effects of tracking and effective alternatives. (LPP)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education

University of Illinois • 51 Gerty Drive • Champaign, IL 61820-7469
(217) 333-1386 • (800) 583-4135 (Voice/TTY) • ericeece@uiuc.edu

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Grouping Students for Instruction in Middle Schools

Rebecca Mills

Teachers and schools use a variety of ways to group students for instruction; most prevalent in middle level schools seems to be some form of ability grouping. *Turning Points*, the middle level reform document of the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989), recommended the elimination of all tracking that groups young adolescents with others of similar ability and referred to tracking as one of the most divisive and damaging school practices in existence. Arguments once considered persuasive for grouping students by ability for instruction are losing their influence in light of a growing body of evidence that the practice results in few achievement benefits and several negative effects. This Digest discusses attitudes toward tracking and prevalent practices, summarizes recent research on ability grouping and tracking, and provides suggestions for further research.

Tracking

There is an obvious conflict between research and practice in middle level schools where students are tracked for instruction. Proponents of tracking argue that tracking helps schools meet the varying needs of students, provides low-achieving students with the attention and slower work pace that they require, allows high-achieving students to be sufficiently challenged by faster-paced, more-demanding lessons, and permits teachers to provide different materials for high achievers and more support to low achievers.

Those opposed to tracking are concerned about the perceived psychological damage to low achievers, the slower pace and lower quality of instruction, the more inexperienced or sometimes less-capable teachers assigned to teach lower-ability students, the low expectations for student performance held by teachers, and the absence of strong behavioral peer role models in classes for low-ability students. Many middle level theorists believe that young adolescents cannot meet goals related to their personal development through tracking (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Fuligni, Eccles, & Barber, 1995; Stevenson, 1992). They argue that young adolescents, naturally inclined toward learning from their peers, need to be grouped with individuals who are different from themselves. Additionally, young adolescents are vulnerable as they struggle to establish a sense of their own identity; tracking often creates negative perceptions of lower-ability students that affect the students' self-perceptions. Tracking, the literature says, has a negative effect on lower-tracked students' motivation and opportunities to learn as well as on their life chances. It also perpetuates class and racial inequities (Oakes, 1992).

Prevalent Practices

Epstein and Mac Iver (1990), using data from the Johns Hopkins Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools survey of 1,753 middle level schools, wrote that principals reported that over 40% of the middle grade schools used some between-class grouping, and over 20% assigned students to all classes based on their ability. Wheelock (1992) reported that there is great variation in grouping practices in all grade organizations of schools containing grade seven. Whole-class ability grouping increased as students moved from fifth through ninth grades (Epstein & Mac Iver, 1990; Lounsbury & Clark, 1990), and in grades five and six, reading and mathematics are the subjects in which students are most often grouped by ability. In grades seven through nine, the subjects are mathematics and English; whereas science and social studies are subjects in which students are least often grouped by ability at all middle grade levels. A 1993 National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) survey revealed that 82% of the responding middle level schools reported that they used some degree of ability grouping (Valentine et al., 1993).

Despite continuing the practice of ability grouping, 36% of the schools in the 1993 NASSP survey reported that they were considering eliminating ability grouping. George and Shewey (1994) studied schools where serious attempts had been made to implement middle school concepts and found that 85% of the respondents selected a "mostly yes" response to the statement that "flexible grouping strategies, primarily heterogeneous, have contributed to long-term effects of our middle school program" (p. 75).

Recent Research

In 1993, Slavin authored a review that summarized what is known about the achievement effects of ability grouping in middle grades (6–9) and other approaches to accommodating student diversity. Drawing on his earlier work, he re-asserted that "if the effects of ability grouping on student achievement are zero, then there is little reason to maintain the practice" (p. 546).

In Spear's 1994 qualitative study, he focused on understanding how and why teachers think the way they do about ability grouping and found that teachers who wish to retain ability grouping are more subject centered, and those who wish to eliminate ability grouping are more student centered; that teachers believe that teaching is easier in ability grouped classes; and that parents are important and powerful influences in decision making about ability grouping.

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Urdan, Midgley, and Wood (1995) worked collaboratively for three years with a middle school staff who wanted to examine and change their policies, procedures, and practices. The staff and researchers concluded that "tracking affects the way teachers think about instruction" (p. 25) and realized that ability grouping makes the entire school schedule less flexible. They concluded that it was particularly important to provide in-service training for teachers in middle level schools to help them teach in new and challenging ways.

Roe and Radebaugh (1993) examined one middle school's elimination of tracking in mathematics, English, and reading classes. They found that shared decision making is important to a successful transition from tracking to de-tracking and that the teachers felt that heterogeneous grouping improved classroom culture. After the elimination of tracking, teachers reported positive social benefits, positive behavioral implications, and less parental competition. The teachers also felt that de-tracking had academic benefits due to the social nature of learning and the strong influence of the adolescent's peer group.

Hoffer (1992) examined whether ability grouping during middle level schooling does act as a "sorting" event with long-term consequences. Using mathematics class enrollment as an indicator that placement during junior high school affected the types of mathematics classes in which students enrolled in high school, Hoffer found that the main effects of ability level and ability grouping were significant; they also significantly interacted in affecting student performance. Hoffer found no positive long-term effects for low-ability students who were placed in low-grouped mathematics classes. In fact, when compared to low-ability students in non-grouped classrooms, those placed in low-grouped classrooms appeared to fare worse. In one study focused on the effects of tracking in mathematics (Mason et al., 1992), researchers placed 34 average-achieving eighth-graders into high-track pre-algebra classes with their high-achieving peers. Several of the average-achieving students did better than their high-achieving classmates and "took substantially more advanced mathematics during high school" (p. 597). The high-achieving students "suffered no decrease in computation or problem-solving achievement" (p. 595), and they scored higher in concepts than their cohort peer groups from previous years. The average-achieving students increased their achievement in concept development and did just as well in computation and problem solving as did their previous "average" classmates.

Conclusion

Theorists and researchers suggest the need for much further research on the topics of ability grouping and tracking. Specifically, we need long-term studies that consider the effects of ability grouping on children's development (Fuligni, Eccles, & Barber, 1995); give systematic accounts of particular schools' efforts to de-track and reorganize (Oakes, 1992; Slavin, 1993); provide documentation of promising alternatives to tracking (Roe & Radebaugh, 1993; Wheelock, 1992); and discuss ways to help low-achieving students keep up with more demanding content and higher expectations (Slavin, 1993). In short, we need to provide what Oakes (1992) called the "technology of tracking," useful guidance to establishing school cultures where tracking no longer makes sense.

Adapted from: Mills, Rebecca. (1997). Grouping students for instruction: Issues of equity and effectiveness. In Judith L. Irvin (Ed.), What current research says to the middle level practitioner *(pp. 87-94). Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association.*

For More Information

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